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A great weekend for affirmative orthodoxy in Prague

by John L. Allen Jr.



Women religious arrive for papal mass in Czech Republic (CNS photo).

Prague, Czech Republic

Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 26-28 trip to the Czech Republic in some ways loomed as a potential minefield, given that it's one of the most secular societies on earth, as well as a land that harbors a traditional animus against both Germans and the Catholic church.

For a one-sentence summary of how things went, here it is: Affirmative orthodoxy is alive and well, and it had a great weekend in Prague.

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at one sentence is a bit of linguistic sleight of hand, of course, because it requires explaining what 'affirmative orthodoxy' means: No compromise on essential points of doctrine and discipline, but the most positive, upbeat presentation possible. Christianity is framed not as a dry book of rules, but as the answer to, as Benedict put it Monday morning, 'the profound thirst for meaning and happiness in the

heart of every person.?

Over his three days here, Benedict XVI repeatedly offered variations on a core theme: Congratulations to the peoples of Eastern Europe on recovering their freedom two decades ago, along with an invitation to ponder what goals that freedom is meant to serve. In effect, Benedict presented himself as a sort of Erasmus for the 21st century, pitching Christian humanism as the key to integrating freedom and truth, faith and reason, and creating a common set of values in an increasingly complicated world.

The three-day swing began on Saturday with a speech to politicians and diplomats in Prague, then continued on Sunday with an open-air Mass in Brno, the largest city in the heavily Catholic Moravia region, which drew an estimated 120,000 people, including large numbers of Poles, Slovaks, Austrians and Germans. It was described by organizers as the largest Catholic Mass in the history of the Czech Republic. (Bear in mind, however, that this history only dates from the so-called "Velvet Divorce" with Slovakia in 1993.)

Benedict also delivered major addresses to ecumenical leaders and to academics on Sunday evening, and closed the trip with a Mass marking the national feast of St. Wenceslas, the "Good King Wenceslas" of the popular Christmas carol, on Monday before returning to Rome.

Popular enthusiasm for the pontiff sometimes seemed tepid, symbolized by the fact that, unlike other cities that host papal visits, Prague did not festoon its streets with Vatican flags or posters with Benedict's image. Events were broadcast live on national television, but otherwise media discussion was limited. Nevertheless, Fr. Jan Balík, press coordinator for the visit, told NCR that what coverage the trip drew was largely positive.

The pope's commitment to affirmative orthodoxy over these three days seemed to embody a deliberate effort to get back "on message."

In many ways, Benedict's surprisingly positive tone was the early storyline of his papacy. It seemed to go into eclipse in early '09, however, with a furor over lifting the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who's a Holocaust denier, and controversial comments on AIDS and condoms during a trip to Africa. Pundits hinted that the "real Ratzinger," the hard-line figure familiar from his years as the Vatican's top doctrinal enforcer, was finally coming to the fore.

Prior to arriving in Prague on Saturday morning, Benedict's trip here likewise seemed fated to beckon the finger-wagging, fire-breathing pope of popular stereotypes.

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The Czech Republic is perhaps the mother ship of European secularization, a point even the Mayor of Prague, Pavel Bem, conceded when he told Benedict on Saturday that his country "has the reputation of being one of the most atheistic societies on earth."

This nation of 10 million also has the worst track record in church-state relations in the former Soviet sphere. Some \$8 billion of church property confiscated under the Communists still has not been returned or paid off, and the Czech Republic is the lone post-Communist state that hasn't approved a basic treaty with the Vatican.

Consider, too, that the Czech Republic has approved a whole raft of social policies at odds with

Catholic moral teaching. Abortion is legal, cheap, and widely available here. The country approved a domestic partnership law for gay couples in 2006, and the Czech parliament is currently considering a measure to legalize euthanasia.

In that context, perhaps the most striking development over these three days is what didn't happen. Not a single word, not even one, flowed from the lips of the pope or any of those subjects.

During a Saturday visit to the famed statue of the Infant of Prague, Benedict delivered an entire address devoted to the family without so much as mentioning abortion or gay marriage — normally staples of Vatican rhetoric on family matters. When the pope's lieutenants touched on church/state disputes, it was merely to confirm comments from interim Prime Minister Jan Fischer to the effect that the two sides agreed that resolving their standoff is not an urgent priority.

(That lack of urgency was apparently not shared by Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague, who described his 18-year tenure as a failure on national television Sunday because of his inability to reach a deal on the restitution of property and a Vatican/Czech treaty.)

Lest any of this seem accidental, Vatican spokesperson Fr. Federico Lombardi all but acknowledged that affirmative orthodoxy was the marching order for the trip in a Sunday evening session with reporters in Prague.

It's important for Czech society to understand the positive attitude of the Catholic church, Lombardi said, describing the spirit with which Benedict XVI approached the visit. We want to collaborate in a positive way and contribute to the life of the society.

The church has a friendly attitude, and the pope is demonstrating this with his presence, Lombardi said. The focus is not on tensions and debates, but on working together.

In part, this option for affirmative orthodoxy may be little more than a return to form for Benedict XVI after what has been, by most accounts, a rocky year so far. In part, too, it was a no-brainer for a German pope coming into the Czech Republic, where nationhood is often defined in terms of resistance to 300 years of rule by the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire and occupation by the Nazis, and whose national hero, medieval preacher Jan Hus, was burned at the stake by the Council of Constance in 1415.

More basically, however, affirmative orthodoxy seems to be one component of Benedict's two-pronged strategy for meeting the challenge posed by secularization and the contemporary crisis of faith in Europe.

For secular society, Benedict's aim is to present Christianity as the best guarantee of the values which even the most ardently secular agnostic also prizes: peace, tolerance, dialogue, and freedom. To make that case, the pope seems to believe he can't start the conversation with flash-points of controversy, but rather with a positive vision of what Christianity has to offer.

For the local church, meanwhile, Benedict's prescription boils down to embracing life as a creative minority. Gone are the days of Christianity as the culturally dominant force; today it's fated to be a subculture, with fewer priests and nuns, lower levels of Mass attendance, and a generally shrunken sociological footprint. The key question, from the pope's point of view, is what kind of subculture it will turn out to be.

Borrowing a phrase from the British historian Arnold Toynbee, Benedict is pressing the church to be a creative minority. Toynbee's contention was that in any civilization, renewal happens when a small subgroup works out fresh responses to new challenges, which are eventually copied by the majority.

On the papal plane en route to Prague, the pontiff was asked what his message would be for a thoroughly secularized country where Christians have been reduced to a minority. His answer was vintage Benedict: 'It's normally the creative minorities that determine the future,' he said.

The key question, of course, is whether that strategy will succeed. It's not clear in the immediate aftermath of Benedict's trip that the outing offered any clear evidence one way or the other.

Trying to reach such snap judgments is especially complicated with this pope, given his penchant for thinking in the long run. Benedict is legendarily indifferent to tomorrow's headlines; his tendency is instead to be concerned with how things will stand two or three centuries down the line. That's probably just as well in the Czech Republic, where the ambivalence of several centuries vis-à-vis the Catholic church was always unlikely to dissolve over a lone weekend in late September.

Alas, however, it also means that we may have to wait a couple of centuries to know whether affirmative orthodoxy actually worked.

John L. Allen Jr. is NCR's Senior Correspondent.

John Allen's complete coverage of papal visit to Czech Republic

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